

RedHeadedStepChild

“An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists.
Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me.”
from Ocean Vuong’s “Notebook Fragments”

“Your father is only your father
until one of you forgets.”
from Ocean Vuong’s “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong”

--The first time he walks into the library-- my library-- i stop dead, i die a thousand tiny deaths, his daughter’s name is Evelyn and more importantly he’s dead. He’s Dead, Capital D, ‘Shot Himself In Our Garage When I Was Eleven Years Old’ Dead. i was at the wedding-- i hated every moment-- i spun and spun in a chair during the rehearsal knocked my head on the concrete floor of the VFW-- it took me years to wear brown and pink again. It wasn’t him who walked into my library, just a lookalike, tall with a red beard the ugly rectangular wire-rimmed glasses so many men seem to love tattoos & a shirt for the dropkick murphy’s, who i hate. & my aunt calls him an evil fucking shithead bastard seven years after the fact. When he died, my friends who knew what happened sang. they later apologized but no-- what kind of mother brings a man whose previous fiance had a restraining order on him, history of domestic and sexual abuse, into her home, her childrens’ home?

but most importantly i will never be a daughter again--

--On my altar there’s a painting of a hummingbird: TICK:TOCK:TICK:TOCK:WE DID
CREATE IT, RIGHT? A family of artists is fantastic fanatic and fabulous, all at once. A house is

only a home if you can ride your bike to it. A house is only a home when someone you recognize is in it. So my first week at college I accidentally go home to a one-woman play starring Monica Lewinsky, real talk here, and my dad's ex-girlfriend hugs me tight, calls my name. As a child she was a goddess and she still is. Still have the stuffed toys she made me out of fabric from thrift stores, still have her sketchbooks left behind when they broke up, and she still swings by the 911, my home, her home, still, if she needs a guitar pedal or place to crash when she's in town. A home is a home always if someone you recognize is there--

--I wear a Celtic cross. I wear Tibetan mala beads. I wear an Allen Ginsberg bracelet. I wear three rings (claddagh, ouroboros, plain silver band). He does not wear jewellery but he has tattoos: a red lotus, for his father, covering up his first tattoo fourteen years old (ASIAN PRIDE stick n poke), a huge ship (his time feeding fishermen off the Alaskan coast), two turquoise backslashes \ to match my mother. His father was a monk. His father was covered head to toe in tattoos, even his bald head and the tops of his calloused brown feet. His father's name was Tim for so long he forgot what name he had been given when he was born an ocean, a genocide away. & so he is left with his spirit, spirituality; when asked he is an anarcho-Buddhist. Now I have a tattoo of a lower-case "a" inside a heart: small-a anarchism, stick n poke, big-hearted prayers to: Allen Ginsberg, Joe Strummer, Emma Goldman, Patti Smith, Robert Mapplethorpe, Anyone Who Will Listen. He has his art and his books and his grand intellectual concepts and all of these symbols boil down to a man who never had children but loves and loves and loves the ones he's found.--

--"I used to call you my tiny minion and mini-me and now I can't:" a justification. "I always hoped you'd change your name to Elliot: the main character of my favorite book:" a statement. "Just embrace the neuroticism:" a projection. Years and years.

I keep wearing her shirts. I check out her favorite book from the University library. The main character's name is John, not Elliot. She will never marry my father because her mother wants her to wear a white dress; the anniversary of their marriage is Labor Day. They tattooed each other and ate chicken wings. She tattooed me for my eighteenth birthday. A pansy, pink. My partner and I will never marry, but they tattooed me once in the spring--

--When I left for college, my library family, my co-workers who watched me grow up, made me a quilt, each square hand-embroidered with some facet or another of my time there, my time here, my time. I learned to embroider and write a resume from my library mom. & she is a furious presence, terrifying in her love & protection. She sat us all down, the kids who adopted her, gave us each a white box and a card: the things she loved about us. Draw on this box things that make you happy, and fill it with love. Cards with hotlines she hoped we'd never have to use.

When Jose got stabbed, she received a box of his sketchbooks. I never want to have to get these fucking boxes for you. I never want to have to do this. So we stayed, I stayed, I went off to college, actually, and promised her a hockey game, two, three, whatever. She promised me a razor for when I start testosterone. I promised myself, for her, that I would buy a pencil sharpener for the first time in years, but I wouldn't use it. And I promised them all I'd come back--

--Family isn't real, but love is. I know how to wash bloodstains out. I know how to play To Have and Have Not by Billy Bragg on the ukulele. I learned from my family, singing around campfires this same song since before I was born, I'm sure. Once a year, each summer, whenever the wind is right, we reunite, sit around campfires, play together. My father & my uncles taught me how to be a man in this world, to be kind to children, to be fiercely loving, to cry, to make my own jewellery, to play so many songs. My stepmoms & aunts taught me how to be a man in this world, to be kind to animals, to protect those smaller than me in the pit, to garden, to make my own clothing, to curse and speak my mind. They taught me how to be a man in this world, and no one could stop me.

I was the flower girl in my aunt's wedding. I wore a pink tulle dress, looked away when she kissed my uncle. I came out to her something like ten years later; she took me aside, hugged me tight, told me: "I wanted you to wear my wedding dress, when you get married. I want you to have it altered, Jimmy. To be a part of your suit."

And we cried together in her garden, the most beautiful place I've ever been, the safest place in the world, a temple, a work in progress, hours and hours of calloused kind hands in dirt, a garden I grew up in & her sons skateboarded through. This family is a thousand clipper ships out to sea and we have always had a painting of a port in our living room--

The Part Where I Tell You What's Going On, or, Analysis

The notion of family is a complicated one. Not just for me, either, although we will of course get extraordinarily personal later (not that we didn't already). Everyone's family is messed up, except my best friend's. Her parents love each other and her and her sister and they don't have any unhealthy coping mechanisms or anything of the sort. But excluding her, everyone's family's got something.

I don't, generally, get along with my blood family, excluding, really, only my father. This piece is called "RedHeadedStepChild." The redheaded stepchild, culturally speaking, is an unhappy, neglected figure, because redheads are the devil. The redheaded stepchild is a bastard. I have had a lot of stepparents. I got through four of them here: the man my mother married, my father's first girlfriend after the separation, my current stepdad, and my current stepmom.

There's an idea in our culture that your family's all you've got. You have to love your mother, your father, your homophobic aunts and uncles. This works for remarkably few people. It doesn't work for me. I think, though, that there's a cultural shift happening, in that many, many more people, especially in the younger generations, are creating their own found families. This has been happening forever in marginalized communities-- you love who loves you, and take care of who does the same-- but it's only just becoming more mainstream. You don't have to put up with shit just because you're blood, and it's a little sad that folks are only just now realizing that

I'm lucky to have a fantastic family that isn't related to me whatsoever: punks my dad met in the early 2000s, my library family, those I love. I'd like to think my narrative illustrates

the shift in attitudes I mentioned above in that I start very, very dark and move into the light, semi-gradually, as perhaps we all will.

I'm so grateful to have who I love.

The quotes at the beginning are both from poems in Ocean Vuong's collection *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, an astounding book (from a contemporary poet!). The first, for me, reflects my own narrative. My mother and her husband were both abusive to my siblings and I, and I am in no way grateful for that, but without those "bombs," I don't think I'd have found the family I have as easily or been able to be related to them as fully. Secondly, my stepfather is Cambodian, and immigrated here during the reign of the Khmer Rouge (y'know, genocide), but a fun fact few know is that the Khmer Rouge gained support largely because they were an alternative to the man the United States government manipulated into power during the Vietnam War. Anyways, that bit of conflict also speaks to me and the history of my family. I'm very close to my stepfather-- he's a good man.

The second quote more so just shows the fluidity of family and raises more than a few questions. How could you forget your father? Can you? Can you reject your family? What if you don't have a dad? And any relation can here be substituted for "father." The notion of family is not static, nor should it be.